



Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary

Ben Witherington III , Darlene Hyatt

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Continuing his series of highly regarded and innovative socio-rhetorical commentaries on the New Testament, Ben Witherington now tackles Romans, perhaps the most profound ? and difficult ? book of the New Testament.

Interacting with recent treatments of this Pauline letter and with ancient Christian commentators, Witherington shows that the interpretation of Romans since the Reformation has been far too indebted to Augustinian readings of the text as filtered through Luther, Calvin, and others. Instead, Witherington urges a reading of the text in light of early Jewish theology, the historical situation of Rome, and Paul's own rhetorical concerns.

Offering a new translation of the Greek text and new insights into Paul and his world, this commentary sheds fresh light on the meaning of Romans for its original audience and for Christian readers today.

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Sagely says

I loved Ben Witherington's The Acts of the Apostles. When I was preaching through Acts, that text was endlessly helpful. So Romans came up in the lectionary this summer, I skipped over a few other commentaries and purchased Witherington's work on Romans. I'm mildly disappointed.

The Introduction is the highlight. Witherington's presentation on the role of prejudice between Gentile and Jewish Christians in the wake of Claudius' edict of expulsion and its subsequent obsolescence was earth-moving in my understanding of this book. I preached five weeks on the role of prejudice in our congregation and our view of God's story, mostly thanks to this commentary.

But when I turned to Witherington's comments on what he calls the heart of the argument in Ro chs 9-11, I was sorely disappointed. Instead of placing Paul's key argument in its social/rhetorical contexts, Witherington fights backdoor wars the whole time with hardline Calvinists. I'm not fan of hard doctrines of predestination-and I don't find them supported in Scripture. However, I didn't need ongoing commentary on how Arminian approaches are correct. I needed a commentary on Romans.

A worthwhile read, but not as helpful as I'd hoped.

Brandon says

Simply one of the best commentaries on Romans I have ever read!

David says

This is a great study book. What I appreciate about Witherington is that in all his books he sites other theologians and adds their comments on a passage, especially those he does not agree with, and gives the reader the opportunity to decide for themselves what the best interpretation might be.

Porter Sprigg says

Interesting perspective on Romans. I appreciated this commentary a lot.

Amanda says

Solid commentary on Romans. In-depth enough to be usable for a theology class, understandable enough to be used by laypeople.

James Korsmo says

Ben Witherington is one of the most prolific New Testament scholars writing today, and he brings a great volume of learning to the texts. In this book, a "socio-rhetorical" commentary, he takes a careful look at Paul's letter to the Romans, paying special attention to the social setting of Paul and his readers, and also analyzing carefully Paul's rhetorical structure and flow. These two emphases make this book a bit different than many commentaries, in that they bring out these two facets of the text, but I think this makes his book the stronger for it. This well-written commentary does justice to this very important and theological letter, discussing the many important issues of interpretation, all the while keeping Paul's "rhetorical strategy" in view. This helps, in my estimation, to help keep sight of the forest among the trees, by placing particular verses and passages within the larger narrative flow, to help see the relations between the passages and their role in supporting his main argument or countering possible objections. This, in turn, helps keep Paul's main idea always in view.

Witherington, with the help of doctoral student Darlene Hyatt, also adds "Bridging the Horizons" sections that illumine applications of texts and themes to our modern day, a very helpful addition. It is certainly not a comprehensive "application" section, but it demonstrates one possible direction one could go when looking at a particular text, and some of them prove quite insightful.

Overall, I think this is a great book on Romans. Witherington's Methodist leanings certainly show through, as do any commentators, but I think this provides a refreshing, non-Reformed and non-Lutheran take on this letter that is still very balanced and seems to take into account Paul's major points with ease. While not the only book one could or should read on Romans (I'm sure there is no such thing), this book is a worthy addition to a library and makes for very good reading.
